

# Gungahlin on a Plate – Stories of Land and Identity in a New Suburb

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**G**ungahlin on a Plate is fifteen digitally produced, laser printed images baked onto melamine plates from David Jones. It's also a writing and photography project, the brainchild of cultural planner and photographer, Barbara Wheeler, who invited me to collaborate with her on the project as a writer.

Gungahlin is the most recent regional development in the ACT and the first to be historically and environmentally surveyed before the finalisation of development plans. The intention of the project was to work with members of the Gungahlin community to produce a 'cultural profile' of the region as a basis for future heritage and cultural management activities. Our cultural profile took the form of a set of souvenir plates, and an accompanying booklet.

Gungahlin on a Plate was funded by the ACT government's arts funding body, the Cultural Council, and supported by a professional reference group with interests in the cultural heritage management of the region. Our host community organisation was the community service that runs the neighbourhood centre in Gungahlin. Photo-Access, Canberra's community photographic studio played a vital role in providing facilities for making the plates and the booklet.

In developing the plates we were keen to show the particular characteristics of Gungahlin as well as various experiences of living there. It is these two aspects of place, and how they can come together in the preservation and representation of place, that I want to draw out in this paper.

During the project I felt as though I was working on something like a survey map on the one hand, and on the other, something more like sections through it from a worm's eye view. Dolores Hayden's (1995) discussion of the 'intricate' and difficult relationship between what she calls 'cultural landscape history' and 'place specific memory' (13) offers a useful way of thinking about this tension.

In terms of the cultural history of the landscape, a distinctive characteristic of Gungahlin is that the frontiers of Australian history are still marked on it. It is visibly borderland territory. I'm interested in how we may recognise, live with, appreciate these borders, rather than, as Paul Carter says in *The Lie of the Land*, continue to ignore 'what was sacrificed in order to create this place we inhabit' (1).

The worm's eye view, in the sense that it is from the perspective of 'creating this place we inhabit', at first glance may seem to contradict the desire to keep the story of what Paul Carter calls 'the ground' visible (*Lie* 2). On the other hand, the place-specific meanings and stories that develop in the context of everyday living may be swamped by what may seem to be more important cultural meanings. It is not an easy relationship, either practically, as I have already suggested, or theoretically, but as Dolores Hayden makes clear, it is an important one, which we need to work with if what we conserve in our environment and, in public art terms, represent, is ever to be more than 'the sum of the parts' (*Power of Place* 13).

In making the plates our challenge was to find ways of bringing together both overview and worm's eye view of Gungahlin—as knowledges of equal importance that

people have to share with one another. One way in which we approached this challenge was through developing our 'community consultation' as a series of walks around the area. But before detailing this process further, I want to give you a sense of 'my' Gungahlin, Spring 1996.

#### A drive to the neighbourhood centre

When I drive to Gungahlin from my place in what is known as the Inner North of Canberra, I drive out from a low-lying area between two hills—Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie. My route takes me down Northbourne Avenue, and after the Yass turn-off I turn left through an industrial estate, to a road that becomes Gungahlin Drive. Almost the last building in the industrial area houses Cafe Mimma—the last stop for cappuccino. Then there's a couple of kilometres of what appears to be rural land before the roundabouts and suburban development start.

As I drive along this in-between bit of road I always watch out for a low hill, more of a rise really, and the Canberra Nature Park sign on the right. This is the native grasslands area—two hectares of natural temperate grassland, not to be sneezed at in relation to the small proportion of the original spread that's now left in south-eastern Australia. It was going to be the town centre, but it was found to be the habitat of the endangered species *Delma impar*, or legless lizard, not to mention the wingless grasshopper, the earless dragon and the mouthless moth (also known as the golden sun moth).

Adjacent to the grasslands is the ruins of The Valley—a small homestead, easy to pick in early spring when its tamarisk trees are in bloom.

From the Valley you can see the quartz ridge, which supplied the early farmers with building materials, and mounds of earth which signal the building of the town centre on the new site which abuts the ruin to the north. What you can't see, back into the grasslands, in the direction from which we've come, but not far from the ruin, are the chert quarries which played a central role in the local Aboriginal economy for thousands of years. These quarries, visible on the surface as stone scatters, show extensive and long term tool making activity in the form of waste flakes and cores.

There is also evidence that suggests that these quarries played a role in the early European use of the land, 'within a few decades' of their use by Aboriginal people (ACT Heritage Council, 1996: 2)

From the Valley it's not far to the first roundabout, the golf course and Perfect Land. Part of Perfect Land is called the Peninsula Development. At its entrance is a plantation of grass trees, which must have been carted from a natural habitat and aren't thriving in this place, and two large metallic kangaroos. For some the kangaroos offer a useful distraction for the kids, and are a landmark in that sense, but others respond to the setting as a developer's gimmick which both covers up and undermines the particularity of place.

#### perfect land

I don't know how they could call it that  
It's fake  
It's a facade  
It's a joke  
'Peninsula' gives the idea of the Gold Coast  
'We'll give you kangaroos and native grasses to keep you happy'

Grass trees never grow like that—they'll die  
(Wheeler and Hutchison, 1996:35)

To continue into Gungahlin—the golf course which flanks the road after the first roundabout features as quite a landmark because it's the first place you are likely to see clusters of people, but as I drive that way I am usually keeping my eyes peeled for Tea Gardens on the Golf Course Estate side of the golf course. Tea Gardens was first built by European settlers in the 1880s. Little of that structure is externally evident now, it looks more like 1940s. The way I can identify it from the main road is to look for an elderly tiled roof just to the right of the tall purple house.

I turn off to the Neighbourhood Centre, just past The Golf Course Estate which, proclaims itself with stone walls and a large sign.

On the way, it always feels like a trip to the edge. But when I get there I'm in a new centre. It's just the angle that's changed.

From my back and front yards I look through houses and greenery to the tip of the hills in our postcard image—Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie, which are now visible as the frame of the landscape.

On the grasslands walk we learned that Ngun(n)awal people know these mountains as the breasts of this part of their country. The plate Barbara and I made in response to this story and in consultation with Ngun(n)awal elder, Ruth Bell, is called Women's country. The text reads

Ngunawal country  
these two mountains  
they are the breasts (1996:26)

### **Making the plates with members of the Gungahlin community**

We invited people into the process of developing text and images for the plates in three main ways. In the first place we organised three spring walks—one to the grasslands with a focus on natural habitat and Aboriginal land use, one to early European farming sites and one a neighbourhood walk which focused on suburban land use and local residents' spots and landmarks. In the second, we asked people who came into the Neighbourhood Centre to mark their landmarks, favourite places and stories of those places on a large and detailed district map which we set up there. In the third place I spoke with and got to know groups of people who meet at the Neighbourhood Centre—running discussion and group writing workshops with them. Here I used a technique of writing down what they said, which I call scribing. This picks up what people have to say in their own words and can be read back and modified with them. I think of it as a collaborative making authored by the speakers.

There was a lot of crossover between these three ways of working—marks and stories on the map became places we walked to, individuals from groups took us on their favourite walks, we held discussions after walks which produced further written material and so on. In a final discussion with people who had been most actively involved, we took along draft designs and text for the plates and asked for response. This was a very lively and engaged discussion which gave new depth to the material.

The walks were the greatest challenge, and to my mind held enormous promise as a form of community consultation. The intention was to set up an exchange between participants' particular knowledges and interests, through an activity which was in itself both pleasurable and moving—the literal movement of walking encouraging the movement of exchange. In fact the walks were both extremely productive and



*Gungahlin on a Plate:  
Wind*



*Gungahlin on a Plate:  
Eric's seat*

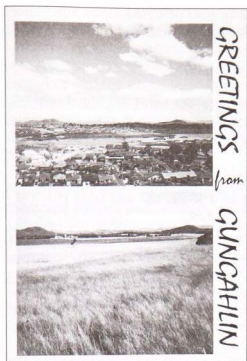
extremely nerve wracking. I'd love to develop a program of walks now, on the basis of what I learned from them.

We planned the grasslands walk with Canberra nature park rangers and also invited Ngunnawal elders, an archaeologist and a landscape architect involved in the design of the water management system for the town centre. Our walk took us not far through native grasses, thistles and weed of the year, serrated tussock. Ruth Bell said,

my grandfather was one of those Aboriginal people employed by the graziers to dig out the serrated tussock (1996: 26)

The shift from firestick farming to European grazing activities was evident in tree stumps as well as the exotic grasses. We found a scar tree. It was windy of course and the grasses bent with the wind.

Daniel from Canberra nature park had a very practical style which highlighted the issues of managing a nature reserve surrounded by houses and adjacent to a town centre:



*Greetings from Gungahlin*



*'All those lovely trees'*

The striped legless lizard  
 A very ordinary worm-like thing  
 We've got it just before it's gone down the gurgler  
 Surrounded by cats and dogs and houses—we've got a very difficult job. (1996:26)

Afterwards we met with people who'd come on the walk:

The wind in the grass  
 You'd think it was further out west  
 It's flat and bleak.  
 All those lovely trees  
 There's one area they've taken them all away.  
 The varieties of birds—kites, eagles  
 Seeing the scar tree—  
 They take care with the way they take the bark from the tree  
 The cut didn't come to a direct point  
 It heals in that shape.  
 Looking at the area as a whole rather than what we could get out of it  
 I felt concerned that it could change so much.  
 The perspective once you're in it  
 With the houses and town centre it's going to look smaller  
 You wonder how long the legless lizard will survive.  
 It was more what people said than what you saw  
 I was fascinated with all the disabled gang  
 And the trees  
 And seeing what the sheep have done to the grass. (1996:26-27)

Several plates developed from this point—all involving further consultation on image and text. There's the scar tree plate:

This is women's country  
 So the bark from these trees was used to make cradles for babies and carriers for food  
 They were careful how they took the bark  
 It heals in that shape.

The grasslands plate is an image of grasses blowing in the wind, encircled by houses. Encircling the houses are names of native plants, at the bottom, inside the circle; we have to hope that the community cares enough.

Lastly a plate called 'All those lovely trees':

Tree clearing was seen as an improvement in the early farming days—2/6 extra for each acre cleared. Replacing them now costs at least \$5 per tree and takes 150 years.

What this process and its outcomes show is a way of bringing various readings of the landscape together. The grasslands walk in particular brought individuals' immediate perception of place—through driving past it everyday, living nearby it, having to manage it, having lost connection with it—together with the cultural history of the grasslands, producing a new engagement with it. The plates show this engagement and bring the broader perspective into the worm's eye view, both through the juxtaposition of image and text and through language that is specific and individual.

The neighbourhood walk opened up a rather different exchange. We went to Eric's seat:

Eric made this seat on the reserve behind his house for people to sit and take in the view. (1996:40)

and Barbara's rock:

I always say we're the house at the top of the hill with the rock. It was such a nice rock we couldn't bear the thought of having it dynamited to pieces. So we asked the builders to move it over to our place. It took them more than an hour with heavy machinery to get it into place. We've put ponds at the bottom of it. And we've discovered, by experimenting with the hose, that you can create a waterfall effect. We just have to get the money together for a proper pump. (1996: 13)

Brendan took us to the rocks that he and his friend Matt have selected as their chairs—they go there after school, hang out, talk about girls. And we saw the sacred baptism space between the gum trees in Homestead park, which has been used by the local Anglican church. Amongst all these things there were people's gardens. Taking images of gardens back to our final discussion we asked 'what is a garden?' Responses indicated its strong symbolic value in 'making this place we inhabit'. We made a plate with garden images called 'Digging yourself in':

Grass please grow  
 At last I can do my own thing  
 A sign of permanence  
 It's a way of offering something back to the place.

I want to finish with the story of an earlier garden—the story of the three pear trees. The site that most drew me in this hybrid landscape was that of the 150-year-old pear trees, planted by John Crinigan, or perhaps his wife Maria.

John Crinigan was transported to Australia from Ireland in 1836 for 'assaulting habitation'. He was assigned to the Campbell's at Palmerville, a major landholding in the Gungahlin area and beyond. There he met and married Maria Mansfield, also a

Palmerville employee. The ruin of the stone cottage they built in the 1840s is sited above a creek which runs between the cottage and what is now a main road. It's likely that he and Maria were set up at this spot, not for their benefit, but to protect a valuable stretch of Palmerville land—arable, with permanent access to water and an easy crossing point for stock. (ACT Heritage Council 1994: 1-5)

John would have been in his mid-twenties when he married Maria. I don't know how old she was, perhaps younger. She died twenty years later. During her marriage she gave birth to ten children, only one of whom survived. It's likely that several are buried around the cottage.

A lot clearing has taken place around the pear trees since the project took place. A new road has been built and house sites pegged out around the fence that encloses them, the cottage and another bit of remaining garden which consists of a hawthorn and a couple of false acacias.

In late spring 1996 the pear trees were in full greenery and the flag irises at their feet were in bloom. The plate we made used an early spring image—blossom and rain clouds.

On the lower slope of the hill  
Overlooking the creek  
Are the three pear trees  
Guardians of a small world  
Shelter, water, orchard.

I wonder how the people who come to live in the new suburb of Amaroo will see the pear trees. Whether they'll be able to see John and Maria's world, or have any sense of the world of grasslands and scar trees. And I wonder what places will come to hold memories and particular meanings for them, and whether there might be public encouragement for them to live within and across these worlds, in a way that treasures the stories of their hybrid landscape, including their own.

#### Works cited

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